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ABSTRACT

This document contains a series of short case studies, called "tales" throughout the text, that describe moral dilemmas that arise in the lives of school-aged children. The tales are intended to help children develop their moral judgment and are meant to be read by teachers to their class. Suggestions for classroom use are provided. A tale intended for children in kindergarten through grade 2 addresses issues of ownership and property. Three tales for children in grades 1 through 3 address issues of loyalty and kindness; competition, honesty, and pride; and religious identity and tolerance. The issues of self-esteem, ethnic identity, racism, and loyalty are considered in a tale for 1st through 4th graders. Three tales for children in grades 3 through 5 cover the issues of loyalty and self-esteem; competition and honesty; and parental pressure, self-discipline, and respect for the elderly. Two tales for 4th and 5th graders address issues of gender identity, sexism, and aggression; and loyalty, coping with physical anomalies, and trust. Each tale includes a list of the moral issues addressed, an introduction for the teacher's use, and a series of questions that the teacher can ask the students. (BC)

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CRIS TALES

Moral Dilemmas for Young School Children

by
Susan C. Harriss

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Moral Dilemmas for Young School Children

by
The Rev. Susan C. Harriss

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For Kirsten
who says what she thinks

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Although I write for children, I do not teach in a school classroom, so I owe a great debt to the teachers and lower-school heads who read these stories and tested them in their classrooms. At the Brearley School, Helen Garrison, Peggy Harding, Anne Burns, Bea Tompkins, and Polly Merrill were generous with their time, their ideas, and their students. Likewise, Jane Warwick at St. David's helped to set the tone for several of the dilemmas. If these case studies reflect real life as experienced by five- to ten-year-olds, it is because these teachers have helped me.

INTRODUCTION

The *CRIS Tales* were written at the request of the Council for Religion in Independent Schools. They are short case studies based on the life-experience of the author and the suggestions of lower-school teachers in New York City independent schools.

These case studies take as a given that every child makes moral decisions from a very early age; moral responsibility is not limited to adults, nor is it limited to courtroom drama. So the dilemmas offered here present situations a child might consider as part of his or her own experience; they are anecdotal. While the basic issues here—kindness, honesty, fairness, personal integrity—continue to figure throughout the life cycle, they are presented in the *Tales* as they might actually appear in the lives of school-aged children. As in real life, the moral questions in these stories present themselves in clusters, and often are at odds with one another. For example, in one story a child must weigh her loyalty and affection for a best friend against the imperative to be kind to younger playmates. Because the demands of friendship color so much of childhood, the needs of friends figure in almost every story.

The stories in this book are intended to *help children develop their moral judgement, and not just to clarify what values they already hold.* In many cases the moral question—stealing, for example, in "The Lost Doll"—depends on a certain cognitive ability: a child will not consider the importance of stealing until he or she first understands what ownership means. Likewise, a child who still is very much involved in the world of fantasy play will have trouble understanding the prohibition against lying, since he or she has yet to gain a firm grasp on the difference between reality and fiction. These same children are, nevertheless, captivated by the moral demands their lives make upon them—the demands for kindness, for fairness, for personal integrity.

Use the discussions that follow the stories to measure your students' grasp of the issues. Do they talk about stealing, or has that not yet occurred to them? Do they mention, in the stories about boasting, the importance of other people's feelings? You may well want to share your own perspective on the story at the end of your discussion—and well you should—not so much as an authority (you will be that anyway) but as a friend who respects the students and recognizes the difficulty of moral decision-making.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CLASSROOM USE

These printed tales are intended for teachers to read and tell orally. The following suggestions will enable the best use of them in the classroom:

DO familiarize yourself with the story as much as possible beforehand. There may be games or situations mentioned that are unfamiliar to your class, and you will want to alter them to suit your school environment.

DO change the names of any characters that are the same as the names of your students.

DO think out your presentation of the story. If you can tell it with hardly a glance at the text, hurrah. The children will benefit from every bit of drama you can add.

Please DO NOT hand the stories out as reading assignments. They will be much more effective if the children hear them presented by an enthusiastic and well-prepared adult, and if they all hear the same story!

DO set a respectful tone for the discussion that follows the story. This is a puzzle, not a quiz, and the sooner your students realize that there are conflicting demands in the story, the more they will gain from its discussion.

DO think of ways to act out the moral decisions the stories suggest. Cooperative games, intentional acts of kindness, or structured opportunities to share will help the children practice what they've considered.

Tale 1

THE LOST DOLL

Grades K-2

Issues:
Understanding ownership; care for property;
envy; theft; honesty; kindness; forgiveness.

Introduction

Five- and six-year-olds rarely "steal"; but they do end up carrying home things that don't belong to them. In "The Lost Doll," one girl loses her doll, and another finds it. Each girl firmly believes the doll is hers.

This story provides an opportunity to work on the question of ownership: Heather owns this doll even though she didn't ask for it, even though she doesn't need or particularly deserve it, even though it could be argued that she didn't take proper care of it. Sarah, who finds the doll, might well take better care of the doll, yet it must be returned to its proper owner. Sarah doesn't think for a moment that she has stolen the doll, but that is precisely what Heather believes Sarah has done.

In the discussion that follows the story, younger children may be more sympathetic to Sarah, particularly those who have not yet mastered the truth that wishing for things doesn't make them true. Be sure to deal kindly with this position, but do correct it before discussing the question of who the rightful owner of the doll might be. Older children, on the other hand, will be more apt to use the word "stealing" in connection with Sarah's appropriation of the doll; you might wait for them to come up with that designation, rather than introducing it yourself.

This story is about girls and girls' toys. To involve boys more in the discussion, you might precede or follow the reading of the story with some drawing. Ask each child to draw a picture of a favorite toy, and then talk about things that have happened to it. Was it ever lost? Did a friend ever try to take it away? Once the boys have favored toys in mind, they may well be more sympathetic to the plight of Sarah and Heather.

The Lost Doll

When Heather Jaynes first opened the package, she was disappointed; the box was big enough for the stuffed penguin she'd wanted, but it held a doll instead: a Ginny doll. The doll had red hair tied in long braids down her back; she wore a blue and white-striped dress with a straw hat to match. Heather knew there were dolls like it, but hadn't thought of asking for one; her aunt just sent it without asking. But soon she liked it well enough, and she played with it all weekend. Perhaps she'd get the stuffed penguin some other time.

On Monday Heather decided that she should take the doll with her to school. It wasn't her turn for show and tell—or sharing, as they called it at her school—but she wanted to take it anyway. Otherwise, her friend Julia wouldn't get to see it. So she took it with her on the bus, and then to show to Mrs. Bentley first thing when she got to school. At reading time she sat the doll beside her book on the table, and when it was time for recess she put the doll's straw hat on its head and took it along. Outside, she and Julia agreed that it was a terrific doll and decided to name her Austen, which sounded very distinguished and unusual; a red-haired doll needed an unusual name, and Austen worked.

Then a game of freeze tag started. When it was Heather's turn to be "it," she set Austen down at the foot of a tree and left her there; she wanted to have both hands free to tag the other children. She had great fun tagging Julia, and then when she wasn't "it" she had more fun tagging Julia again to get her unfrozen. She loved freeze tag because she could run fast, fast; she was almost never tagged herself! It was great.

When it was time to go back inside, Heather didn't really want to go; she and Julia both shuffled their feet in protest as Mrs. Bentley lined them up to go in and start their math.

It wasn't until she was in the middle of her math paper that Heather remembered: she had left Austen sitting outside at the foot of the tree. She raised her hand and told Mrs. Bentley that she'd left her doll outside and needed to get her right away. Mrs. Bentley said she was sorry but she would have to wait until all the children were finished with math, and then she would go outside with Heather to find the doll.

But when Heather and Mrs. Bentley went outside, Austen, her beautiful doll, wasn't there!

She turned to Mrs. Bentley in tears. "It's gone! Somebody's stolen my doll!"

Meanwhile, in the first-grade classroom, Sarah Stevens had finally gotten herself a Ginny doll. She couldn't believe her good luck.

Sarah had wanted a Ginny doll for *months*, ever since her cousin on Long Island had gotten one. And today, while she was outside playing at school, there was the doll she had been wishing for. Isn't it great when wishes come true? At the foot of the same tree where she always played, every single day at recess, at the foot of that very tree there was this beautiful doll waiting for her, wearing a blue-striped dress and a straw hat. It had red hair. Sarah decided to name the doll Phoebe. When it was the end of play time, she carefully picked her up and took her inside, and set her on the desk beside her.

She said to her best friend, Lindsay, "Remember how I was wishing and wishing for a Ginny doll? Well, I got one! She was under the tree waiting for me at recess. No one was playing with her at all! Isn't it neat that I finally got my wish? Don't you like her? Isn't she pretty?"

But then Mrs. Bentley, from the second-grade class down the hall, came into the room with Heather Jaynes and said that something terrible had happened. A doll had been lost. Sarah took Phoebe into her lap and held her while Mrs. Bentley talked, saying that Heather had lost her beautiful red-haired doll that very day. Sarah set the doll on the desk and suddenly heard Heather Jaynes say, "There it is! *She* has it." Heather came right over and pointed. But Sarah clutched Phoebe and told Mrs. Bentley, "This doll is mine! I wished for it and I got it! I found it!"

Mrs. Bentley made Sarah give the doll back to Heather. When Heather got back to her room, she said to Julia, "That girl Sarah Stevens *steals*! I'm not going to play with her anymore, and you shouldn't either."

But Sarah Stevens thought that Mrs. Bentley was mean, and that she had let Heather Jaynes take her new Ginny doll.

Questions

- **What's happening here?**
- Why did Sarah Stevens think the doll belonged to her? Can we get things by wishing for them?
- Did Heather want the doll as much as Sarah did? If not, would that make it okay for Sarah to keep the doll?

- Would it be all right for Sarah to hide the doll instead of giving it back? Why (or why not)?
- Should Sarah say she's sorry?
- Should Heather say she's sorry?
- What about Julia, Heather's best friend? Should she be friends with Sarah now? Or should she leave her alone?

Tale 2

TWO'S COMPANY

Grades 1-3

Issues:
Loyalty; envy; kindness;
inclusion of newcomers or younger children.

Introduction

We all wish childhood friendships could change to meet new circumstances! But they don't always. The passionate attachments of young children—the "best friends" of grade school years—don't always accommodate the moral demand for kindness to other children—particularly new acquaintances and younger siblings or neighbors.

In "Two's Company," Sasha has this happy dilemma: her best friend will come for the very first time to the vacation home where Sasha has always spent a month each summer. But Sasha's special summer friend, a younger neighbor who has always been there, will surely want to be included. What to do?

Kindness, empathy, and the obligations of friendship figure in this story.

Two's Company

"I'm a lucky, lucky, lucky, lucky girl," Caroline sang, all the way to Chautauqua Lake. She had never been to Chautauqua Lake before, and it was a long drive, but it was okay by Caroline: her best friend Sasha was already there. She hadn't seen her for three whole weeks, since the end of school. But now, at Chautauqua, they could play every day. *All day.* And have sleepovers.

Sasha was excited, too. She'd been to Chautauqua every year of her life, and she loved it: the lakes, the brick walks, the little stone turtle on the step of her house. She loved the day camp where she swam and played, and she wanted a new Chautauqua tee-shirt. She couldn't wait to show Caroline every little thing about Chautauqua.

But there was a problem: her next-door neighbor Lauren.

Lauren was only just turning five, but she and Sasha had played every summer just the same. Sasha's mother said, quite sternly, the day before Caroline came, "Sasha, remember that Lauren is your friend, too. *She* wants to play with you, too." Sasha just shrugged her shoulders and said, "I know. No problem."

But it was a problem. It had to be. Lauren didn't know any of the games that Caroline and Sasha had learned at school. She couldn't read or write notes to them. She wouldn't put her head under water the way Sasha liked to. She was a baby. "You can't just go off and leave her once Caroline's here," her mother said. "Remember, Sasha, Lauren wants to play, too."

"Oh, brother," Sasha thought.

Caroline came the next day, and Sasha ran to meet her. They were so-o-o excited. And Lauren was fine. They all played together and it was great.

The next day it wasn't so great. Caroline's mom had offered to bake a cake with her and Sasha; they were going to do it as soon as she got back from the grocery store, and the two girls played at Sasha's while they waited. Lauren came over, and they all pretended to be dogs. Lauren was pretending to be a terrier, and she was good at it; she made a really good barking noise that sounded just like Julie, the little terrier that lived next door to Caroline in the city. Caroline was impressed. She decided she would be a terrier, too. Sasha

wanted to be a German shepherd, so she was, and the three of them were still being dogs together when Caroline's mom got back from the grocery store.

"All right, girls," Mrs. Spencer said brightly, "Let's go and get started on this cake. Who's going to break the eggs? And who wants to grease the pan? She noticed that Lauren was there and quickly added, "Why Caroline, let's ask Lauren to come and help! I bet you'd like that, wouldn't you, dear?" Mrs. Spencer asked Lauren. Of course Lauren said, "Yes."

Sasha rolled her eyes at Caroline, but Caroline wasn't even looking; she and Lauren were running ahead to Caroline's cottage. Sasha shrugged and took Mrs. Spencer's hand and walked with her.

When they got to the cottage, though, Caroline and Lauren were nowhere to be seen until, suddenly, "Booo!" they cried, as they jumped out from under the kitchen table, and started barking and yipping like terriers again. "We want cake! We want cake!" they chanted.

Sasha was very upset. She didn't like the way Caroline and Lauren were leaving her out. "This isn't fair!" she cried. "I'm not having a good time, Caroline! I thought you were my friend!"

Caroline started laughing and said, "Yes, it is fair. The terriers were just scaring the German shepherd, that's all. Don't be upset, Sasha!"

But Sasha *was* upset. She was very upset. Her mom had made her promise always to include Lauren, and now here Lauren and Caroline were not including *her*. "This isn't fair, Mrs. Spencer," she told Caroline's mom.

Mrs. Spencer took Sasha by the hand and said, "I'm sorry you're feeling left out. How about if you take the first turn at the cake? Would you like to put the flour into the bowl, or break the eggs?"

This made Sasha feel better; she broke the eggs. Within a few minutes things were back to normal, and Caroline even gave her an extra turn at stirring the bowl. By the time the cake went into the oven, it seemed like everything was going to be all right. At least Sasha thought so, and Caroline thought so. But all of a sudden Mrs. Spencer looked upset.

"Girls," she said, "where's little Lauren?"

Lauren was nowhere to be found. It must have been while they were putting the cake in the oven, or maybe even before; they hadn't noticed. But she had slipped out.

"This isn't good," Mrs. Spencer said. "Lauren seems to have gone. I think we'd better go looking for her, don't you?"

Sasha didn't say anything. Caroline didn't say anything. Neither of them knew what to do.

Meanwhile, Lauren had wandered down to Sasha's cottage and was talking to Sasha's mother. "Ever since Caroline came," she said, "Sasha has been mean to me!" Sasha's mother wasn't pleased, and she was about to find Sasha to tell her so.

Questions

- **What's happening here?**
- What should these girls do?
- Are the moms right to insist that all three girls play together?
- Is Sasha being mean to Lauren? Is Caroline being mean? Why?
- Was Caroline's mom right to include Lauren in the cake-baking?
- Should Caroline's mother make a separate time for her to play with Lauren, without Sasha?

Tale 3

IN THE SWIM

Grades 1-3

Issues:
Competition; integrity; honesty; pride.

Introduction

Children like to boast! Sometimes it gets them into trouble, though. In this story about two close friends, Jason Barnes finds himself about to be caught in a lie; he has bragged to his school friend, Todd, that he can swim rather well. In fact, however, he can just splash, play, and go underwater in the shallow end of the pool. Jason's boast will be uncovered at a classmate's birthday party, unless he thinks of a way out. Pride and personal safety compete in this story about two eager boys.

In the Swim

At the end of the summer, Jason Barnes still didn't know how to swim.

He could hold his breath all right; he could go underwater in the shallow end of the pool and stay there a good long time. He could even jump from the side of the pool and go underwater, and come up just fine. But he had to stay at the shallow end. He could *almost* swim, really. He could almost swim. He just couldn't go in the deep end.

This would not have been a problem for Jason if his best friend Todd hadn't come back from summer vacation full of stories about swimming. Todd went away to a lake where they had a swim club and teams and swim meets, and when he came back he could really swim. He knew the crawl, and the backstroke, and he could swim under water a long time without coming up for air. He could even dive from the high board. At least that's what he told Jason.

Jason wasn't jealous, really. He just wished that he could swim the way Todd could. He thought maybe it was dumb to be seven-and-a-half years old already and not know how to swim, especially if you were a boy. So when Todd told him all those stories about swimming up at the lake, Jason came back with a story of his own. Jason told Todd that he could actually dive from the high board at the pool where he'd been swimming that summer, and that he wasn't scared a bit. He even got Todd to believe that the high board at the pool he used was higher than the board at Todd's lake. He said it was 12 feet from the water!

Well, you can imagine what happened, can't you? A boy in their class, Walter Darrow, had a swimming party for his birthday in early October, and both Jason and Todd were invited. It was to be at an indoor pool, and there would be swimming races and water games, and maybe even a diving board!

When Jason got the invitation to the party he was pretty excited. But then he thought about Todd. Todd and Walter were good friends, too, and Jason was pretty sure that Todd had also been invited to the party. What if there was a diving board at the pool? What if there was a *high* diving board at the pool?

Jason didn't want to admit to anyone that he couldn't swim yet; that part would be hard enough. But what if Todd suggested that they dive off the high board? What would he do then?

The day of the party came, and Jason took his swim trunks to school with him so that he could go straight to the party afterwards. Todd's mother had offered to take both boys to

the party. Jason sort of wished it was his own mother coming to the party, and he asked her why she couldn't take him, even though he already knew the answer: she had to work that day. So he took his trunks, and he took his swimmies—those armbands you blow up and swim with. Maybe he could just stay at the shallow end of the pool and not be noticed. Maybe Todd would get an ear infection or something and not be able to go into the water! Or maybe *he* should pretend to have an ear infection and say *he* couldn't go into the water! He didn't know what he was going to do.

When he and Todd left the dressing room at the pool and went out to the water, the other boys from their class were already in the pool shouting and splashing. Walter was up on the diving board already, and about to jump in. When he saw Jason and Todd he shouted and waved. "Hey, Barnes!" he called to Jason. "Watch this!" And he jumped into the pool, making huge splashes.

This made Jason want to get into the water right away. He said to Todd, "Last one in's a rotten egg!" and jumped into the shallow end.

Todd jumped in beside him, and they started splashing each other. Jason went underwater a couple of times and suggested that he and Todd see who could stay under the longest. They did, and Jason won. Then Todd suggested that they try again. Jason closed his eyes, held his nose, and went under the water. He held his breath, and held his breath, and held his breath. Just when he couldn't hold it a second longer he popped up out of the water, shouting, "Beat'cha! Beat'cha!"

But Todd was gone. He had gone underwater and started swimming, and now he was several feet down, toward the other end of the pool where it was over their heads.

Todd's head came out of the water. "Come on, Jason! Come over here!" he called. He wanted Jason to come to the deep end.

Jason knew that the deep end was deeper than any water he'd ever been in. And that diving board was there—it was a low one, but it was there. What was he going to do?

Questions

- **What's happening here?**
- Why did Jason tell Todd he could swim?
- Do you think Todd was telling the truth about his swimming and diving skills?

- What should Jason do? Is there anything he can say to change things?

Tale 4

GETTING THE GREEN

Grades 1-3

Issues:
Religious identity; kindness; tolerance.

Introduction

The winter holiday season is a time of good cheer, but it can also be a time of discomfort between friends. The *practical* differences between Judaism and Christianity surface during the winter holidays more clearly than at other times, particularly for young school children who are just learning the different rituals of their respective traditions. This can be a great learning time, but also a time when children are bound to feel left out of something—whether it's the lighting of a menorah or the visit of the man with the beard. In "Getting the Green," two close friends come to sharp disagreement over the advantages of their respective religions, and what begins as an argument over fairness and sharing turns into an interfaith squabble.

Use this story with students who have had exposure to both Chanukah and Christmas traditions.

Note: The "blue and yellow" as the colors for Chanukah came from the lips of a six-year-old Jewish child; as far as I can tell there is no foundation for this except perhaps for the colors of the flag of Israel, and the resemblance to darkness and light. Nor, of course, do the colors red and green have a great bearing on Christmas! Nevertheless, the attempts to balance Chanukah and Christmas effectively raise the question of religious identity for this age group—and for many adults as well.

Getting the Green

"Chanukah! Chanukah! Chanukah is here!" Kristin was in the bathtub, singing. She had a tub full of water, right up to the top, and that's the way she liked it. She was flipping around like a dolphin and singing, "Chanukah is here!"

"Mama," she called. "Mama, what are our colors?"

"What?" her mother answered.

"You know, our colors. Rachel told me Chanukah colors are blue and yellow. What colors do we get?"

"Are you asking me what colors are Christian colors, Kristin?"

"Yes. What are our colors?"

"Well, *Christmas* colors are green and red, if that's what you mean. Green and red."

"Oh, goody!" Kristin chirped, "Green is my favorite color. Wait till I tell Rachel! Christians get green!"

Her mother looked at her in a funny sort of way and said, "Get out of the tub, please. Time for bed."

Kristin thought it was a wonderful world. She was Christian; her friend Rachel was Jewish. Christians got the green. She couldn't wait to tell Rachel the next day.

Rachel came over to play at her house the next day—in fact, she came to decorate Christmas cookies with Kristin and her mom. Kristin's mother made some white icing, then tinted two cups of it: one green and one red.

"Oh, goody!" Kristin said. "Green and red! Christmas colors! We get green, don't we, Mama? We're Christian!"

"That's not true!" Rachel said. "Green is a Jewish color, too, isn't it, Mrs. Hanes?"

"Well, green is the color of the green world, and Jews believe God made the green world, so I guess it's a Jewish color, too!"

"Mama, that's not fair! You told me green was a Christian color! Now Rachel has three colors and I only have two!"

"Kristin, I said green was a *Christmas* color. We have lots of green things at Christmas, like a green tree.

"But Rachel gets a menorah. Can we get a menorah, Mama?"

Kristin's mother sighed and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. She was thinking about what to say.

"Mrs. Hanes, that *wouldn't be fair*," Rachel objected. "It wouldn't be fair for Kristin to have a menorah *and* a Christmas tree. Christians get too many presents and toys, and that's all Kristin thinks about."

Kristin dropped her jaw in amazement. "*Mama*! Did you hear what she said? She called me greedy!"

Kristin's feelings were hurt. She didn't know what to say.

Rachel looked guilty. "Well," she muttered, "it's the truth."

"Rachel's just jealous because I'm going to get presents from Santa Claus and she isn't," answered Kristin.

"Kristin, stop it!" her mother snapped. "Both of you girls stop this right now! You've got to find a way to make up or we're going to stop decorating cookies this instant!"

Kristin and Rachel looked up at Mrs. Hanes and saw that she looked annoyed. Her cheeks were pink, her eyebrows pinched across her forehead. She didn't look like she was kidding, not one little bit. But Rachel thought she was right, and Kristin thought *she* was right.

"Rachel," Kristin began, "I don't think we ought to decorate Christmas cookies anymore, because Christmas is for Christians, and you don't believe in Jesus."

"How do you know, Kristin? Maybe I *do* believe in Jesus. *You* don't know everything about me! Besides, my mother said that you don't have to believe in Jesus to have a

Christmas tree; she said lots of Jewish people have Christmas trees. I'm going to make her buy me one this year; then *I'll* have a menorah and a Christmas tree both!"

"Now *you're* being greedy, Rachel! Mama, Rachel gets everything!"

Mrs. Hanes looked unhappy. "I thought you girls were best friends," she said quietly. "Don't you think it would be best to stop arguing about all this?"

Questions

- **What's happening here?**
- Are there certain colors for certain religions? Are blue and yellow really Chanukah colors, or do they just represent darkness and light? Are red and green important to Christmas?
- Is it okay to have a menorah *and* a Christmas tree?
- Why did Rachel say that Kristin was greedy?
- Why do you think Rachel is saying that she believes in Jesus? What would happen if she did? Would that make her a Christian?

Tale 5

WHO CAN BE ALICE?

Grades 1-4

Issues:
Fairness; self-esteem; ethnic identity;
loyalty in friendship; incipient racism.

Introduction

Six-year-olds will often choose or exclude their friends on the basis of looks. Among black and white children together, this can be especially touchy; just as adults are encouraging children to ignore physical differences, the children are seeing very clear differences. They may well make unkind—and unfair—judgments based on these differences, often to their own detriment. In "Who Can Be Alice?" a young black girl is excluded from a recess re-play of *Alice in Wonderland* because her hair isn't right for the part. Loyalty, self-esteem, and personal integrity figure in this story.

Who Can Be Alice?

The day Starkeisha had her hair all braided up, in 21 different braids, all with different colored beads at the bottom, she couldn't wait to get to school. She couldn't wait to see her friend Judy Hill and show her the new braids. She gulped down her breakfast, and when her mother dropped her off at the front door of the school, she ran right in without even waving good-bye.

She was already putting her coat in her locker when Judy came into the hallway, holding her mother's hand. Starkeisha decided not to say anything; she decided to be cool. She would wait at her locker and see if Judy noticed that anything was different.

Sure enough, Judy noticed right away. "Starkeisha! *What* did you do to your *hair*?!" she exclaimed.

"Mama braided it," Starkeisha replied, as though such a thing happened every day in her house.

"Your mother did the *whole thing*?" Judy asked in amazement. Her eyes were wide.

"Sure. She did it last night. It took a whole hour."

Judy tugged at her mother's sleeve and pulled her over to Starkeisha's locker. "Mama, come see what Starkeisha did to her hair! Look how many braids she's got!"

Mrs. Hill came over to say hello. "Look at her hair, Mama!" Judy exclaimed. "Isn't it amazing?!"

"Why, Keisha," Mrs. Hill said, "Keisha, that's very interesting. It must have taken a long time to do."

"It took my Mama a whole hour," Starkeisha said proudly. She took Judy's hand and said, "Come on, let's go." And she and Judy went right into class.

They sat down together and started to work on a puzzle until the teacher called them to order. Starkeisha sat toying with her braids, looking at them. They felt great.

Mrs. Robbins, their teacher, began the day by announcing that they were going to start a new book that day, a book called *Alice in Wonderland*. Judy poked Starkeisha and said that *Alice in Wonderland* was her favorite story in the whole world, because she, Judy, looked just like Alice.

The teacher held up a picture of Alice from a Walt Disney book, and Starkeisha saw that Judy was right. She did look just like Alice. Judy had long blond hair, straight as a stick, and shiny; she wore it pulled back in a pale-blue bow. And she always wore the same white blouses with her school uniform, white blouses with round collars just like the blouse on Alice in the picture. Judy was beautiful, just like Alice, and Starkeisha was glad to be her friend.

Mrs. Robbins read them 20 pages from *Alice in Wonderland*, and all of the girls loved the story. They loved it so much that when it was time for recess, everyone wanted to make believe that they were Alice or the white rabbit. Starkeisha wanted to take a turn pretending to be Alice, but suddenly Judy looked at her strangely and said, "You can't be Alice, Starkeisha. Your hair is all braided up!" Starkeisha looked at her in amazement. She couldn't believe Judy would make such a big deal of it.

To make matters worse, mean Liz, who Judy and Starkeisha usually kept away from, chimed in, "Yeah, you can't even be the white rabbit, Starkeisha, because you're not even white! You can't be anything in this story at all!"

Starkeisha stormed away, feeling angry and puzzled. "It's all make-believe anyway," she muttered. "I can pretend anything I want."

She left Judy with mean Liz and went on over to the tire swing. She wouldn't let anybody else on it; she growled at anybody who came near. She said "No white girls on this swing! This swing is black and you have to *be* black to swing on it!" And she swung it so hard, so fast, faster than any of the other girls would dare. She knew *that* would keep them away, because they would be afraid.

After recess, Starkeisha sat with Judy again. She wasn't quite as mad as before. She reached out, without thinking, and touched Judy's hair. It was so soft! Judy grabbed her hand and said, "Don't!"

"It's okay," Starkeisha said. "I'll let you touch my hair."

"I don't want to," Judy said, and went right on with what she was doing.

When Starkeisha got home that afternoon, she went straight to her room and started taking out the braids her mother had so carefully put in. She pulled the beads out and threw them on the floor. Her mother walked in and saw it.

"Starkeisha Lee Adams!" she said, sharply. "What on earth do you think you are doing?"

"I'm taking out my braids, Mama. I want my hair to be straight!"

"Oh, no, you're *not*!" her mother replied. "Your braids are beautiful, and you are beautiful, and I'm putting the braids back in."

Starkeisha let her mother put the braids back in, but she also started to cry. "Now I'll never be Alice," she said. "They'll never let me be Alice."

Questions

- **What's happening here?**
- Was it fair of Liz and Judy to say that Starkeisha couldn't have a part in the story? Why did they do that?
- Was it fair of Starkeisha to keep the other girls off the tire swing?
- Can Starkeisha be Alice? Why or why not? Should she try to change her hair?
- What should Judy do? Can white girls and black girls be best friends with each other?
- Is there anything you would like to change about this story?

Tale 6

HE'S OUT!

Grades 3-5

Issues:
Loyalty in friendship; dealing with competition;
kindness; self-esteem.

Introduction

Kids grow and make new friends in every grade as interests change and confidence grows—or slows. The motor skills required for a game of kickball, or jacks, suddenly sort the children along new lines, and different rates of development will strain some friendships and strengthen others.

In "He's Out!" Eddie James has a chance to befriend some of the older boys in his class in a game of kickball. His best buddy, Joey Barker, doesn't quite have the same ability, but tries to keep up. The resulting game hurts Joey's feelings, and challenges Eddie's loyalty. Will he join the older boys in mocking Joey? What happens when competition challenges friendship?

He's Out!

In the first place, Joey Barker didn't like kickball. Not that much. Besides, he and Eddie James had something else going that day outdoors: they'd found a great place to hide behind the dumpster at the end of the playground, and they were going to set up a fort out there with a box—a huge cardboard box—they had found the day before.

Joey and Eddie had been best friends since the beginning of school the year before; they did everything together. They stuck together no matter what.

So at ten o'clock, when it was time to play outdoors, Joey rushed out to the dumpster, pulling his jacket on as he went. Eddie came along, but then he stopped.

"Hey Joey—Murphy and those guys are going to play kickball. Wanna come?"

Joey stopped walking and looked at Eddie like he was crazy. Murphy? You gotta be kidding. Murphy was the oldest—and easily the roughest—boy in the class, and he made sure everybody knew it. Joey still remembered the first day of kindergarten, when Murphy called him a stupid jerk, just because he stumbled over a block tower Murphy was building. Joey had decided to stay away from Murphy. Forever.

So now he turned and looked at Eddie. "Are you serious? You're going to play with Murphy?" And he added, sarcastically, "Good luck, stoo-pid."

Eddie just shrugged and went over to start playing with Murphy and the others. Joey went over to the dumpster and started the fort by himself, but it wasn't the same. He needed Eddie to stand the box up straight. He looked over to the kickball game to see if Eddie was having a good time. It sure looked like it. He was on second base already. Joey threw the box down into the dust and went over to watch. Eddie caught sight of him and said, "Hey, Joey, come on and play! We need you!"

Reluctantly Joey agreed to take a turn. Murphy was pitching. Joey went up to home plate and waited for the ball to come. When it did, he took three steps, pulled his leg back hard, and kicked. Not good. The ball just barely moved, and went over the baseline.

"Strrrike!" called Murphy. "Try again." Murphy rolled the ball again, and Joey kicked a second time. Bad again.

"Strrrike two," Murphy called. "Don't know about your friend here, Eddie old boy." And he rolled the ball again.

By now Joey was talking to himself. "Okay, Barker," he was saying, "this time you're going to kick it good, so good, and you're going to run around the bases and you're going to go fast, so do it!"

Murphy rolled the ball. Joey stepped back, took a good leading run, pulled his kicking leg back, and swung it forward for all he was worth.

"*Oh my God!*" Murphy shrieked. "I don't believe it. He actually missed the ball! He *missed* the *ball*! He's out! Out, out, out!"

Murphy was holding his sides and laughing. Then Eddie started to giggle. "Aw, come on, Murphy," Eddie said. "Don't make fun of the guy. Can't you see? His legs are too short. They can't reach the ball!"

"Oh, that's right, I forgot. Joey-baby's just a baby. How old is the baby?" Murphy got right up close to Joey's face and grinned. "Widdle baby," he said. "Widdle baby kick the ball? See de ball? Widdle baby kick?"

This was more than Joey could take. He took a swing at Murphy, a good one, caught him on the chin, and then took off running. There were tears in his eyes that he didn't want anyone to see. Least of all Murphy, but now not even Eddie. His used-to-be best friend.

Just then his teacher, Mrs. Robbins, stopped Joey to see what was wrong. She noticed Joey's red face.

"Why Joey," she asked, "whatever is the matter?"

Questions

- **What's happening here?**
- What were Eddie and Joey planning to do that day together?
- Was Eddie right to go over and play kickball with Murphy when Joey didn't want to play?

- Was it okay for Joey to stay away from the kickball game, or should he have tried it earlier?

- What if Eddie wants to be friends with Murphy and the bigger boys now? Does that mean he has to leave Joey out? Can Eddie be friends with Joey *and* with Murphy now?

- Should Joey tell the teacher what happened? Why or why not?

Tale 7

TRADING WHOPPERS

Grades 3-5

Issues:
Competition; honesty; self-esteem; loyalty.

Introduction

Kids love to boast! Pride is great, but unending comparison of clothes, houses, and vacations can be tiresome and surprisingly hurtful.

In "Trading Whoppers," Franny Williamson is so tired of her classmate's ski resort stories that she cooks up a story of her own, and gets a friend to cooperate. But there's barely a shred of truth in what she says. Her teacher gets wind of it and naively asks her about it in front of the whole class.

What to do? How can braggarts be borne?

Trading Whoppers

What started out as a white lie turned into a big one. It all began on the steps of the school that Thursday morning when Josie Parker was bragging to Frances Williamson about her ski trip. It wasn't just that Josie got to go skiing, and Franny didn't; Franny didn't like to ski. It was the way Josie always talked about skiing that made Franny want to choke her.

Josie went on and on that day about the big ski lodge they were going to on Friday night, she and her mother and brother. It was in Aspen, Colorado, which Josie just called "Aspen," and if you didn't know it was in Colorado she acted like you were stupid or something. But how was Frannie supposed to know? That was so far away! Josie went on and on—about her new skis, and the ski lift, and how she was ready to take intermediate lessons from Ted, the cute ski instructor she met before Christmas, the last time they went skiing. And how she was going on the intermediate slopes. She used words Franny hadn't learned, words like "slalom" and "mogul." Franny had had about enough. She thought, "If I hear 'slalom' one more time, I'll explode. It's time to get even."

"My Uncle Willy," she said, "my Uncle Willy knows more about skiing than you do." This was true, partly—Uncle Willy knew a lot about cross-country skiing, not downhill skiing. But Josie was talking about downhill skiing. "He knows how to ski behind a dogsled; he's going to the North Pole."

"Oh, no," groaned Josie, "not Uncle Willy again. We've all heard enough about Uncle Willy. Besides, didn't you say once that he's not really your uncle—just a friend?"

Franny had said that, but now she denied it. After all, she and her brother had always called her dad's friend "Uncle" Willy. "That's not true," she said. "Uncle Willy is Uncle Willy. And he skis everywhere, and takes trips in the snow, and he's famous. He's going to be on the cover of *National Geographic* next spring."

That part was true. Willy *was* going to the north pole, and he *was* going to be on the cover of *National Geographic*. The next part wasn't true:

"And when he gets back, he's taking me and Judy to Alaska with him."

Franny didn't know why she had said it; it just came out. She was surprised at how easy it was to make up. Well, maybe it could turn out to be true. Maybe next time Uncle Willy came to visit she could ask him. That wasn't so far-fetched.

Later that day, at lunch, Franny confided in Judy Bates, her best friend, about Josie. "Look, Judy, if Josie asks you, tell her you're going to Alaska with me and Uncle Willy. That should shut her up!"

Judy Bates thought about it for a minute. It wasn't true, what Franny wanted her to say—nobody was going to Alaska with Willy. Judy hadn't even met him, though Franny talked about him all the time. On the other hand, everybody was sick of hearing about Josie and her skiing trips. She got to go out so often, to such glamorous places, and she was always going on about Ted the ski instructor as if he were her boyfriend or something. They were only in fifth grade. Josie had to have all the latest styles in everything—which was okay, that was her business—but when the other girls got new clothes she had a way of saying something mean about them. Last time Franny got a new sweater, Josie said she looked like a jerk. Maybe Franny was right, maybe it was time to give Josie some of her own medicine. "Okay," she sighed, "if she asks me, I'll tell her."

And right away Judy Bates regretted it. She felt creepy. She wished she hadn't agreed to lie for Franny. She had a funny feeling about it, like there was a bad smell around her somewhere. But Josie couldn't keep going with her ski stories. It was just too much.

Sure enough, at the end of school that day Josie got onto the bus still talking about her trip. She came down the aisle and stopped next to Franny. "Well, guys," she sighed, "I guess you won't be seeing me tomorrow at school; guess I'll just be swooping down the slopes. So sorry I can't stick around! It will be just *miserable* without you, dahlings!"

Franny was sitting next to Judy, so she elbowed her. Judy looked out the window and pretended not to notice. "Well, Josie," said Franny, "I hope you have a good time in your plush, cozy skiing lodge—what's it called, the *Cozy Inn*? When Judy and I go to Alaska we'll be roughing it with Willy and the dogs...."

"Oh, baloney, Franny Williamson, that's just stuff you're making up. Judy, talk some sense into this girl, won't you? I can't believe she thinks I believe this junk about Alaska."

Judy sighed. There didn't seem to be any way out of this one. "It isn't bunk, Josie," she said, in a tired, annoyed sort of way. "It's all true. If my mom and dad will let me, I'm going to go cross-country skiing in Alaska with Franny."

"Oh, yeah?" Josie's eyes got wide. "When?"

Judy glanced at Franny, who was smiling at her as if to say, "Go on, go on...." Judy gulped and said, "During spring break."

"Oh, I see..., " said Josie. She touched the side of the seat and passed on down the aisle.

"Whew. Thanks, Judy. You're a real pal," Franny said, when Josie had finally found a seat. And they both thought it was over.

Unfortunately, it wasn't over. When Josie came back from her ski trip on Tuesday, full of stories about Ted and the intermediate slopes, she also was full of stories about Franny and Judy.

At sharing time, she said to the teacher, "Oh I'm sure my time in Aspen—you know, in Colorado (she glanced at Franny)—my time in Aspen was exciting, but it's nothing compared to what Franny and Judy are doing during spring break! Hasn't Franny told you, Mrs. Beaver? They're going cross-country skiing in Alaska!"

"Why, girls, that's wonderful," said Mrs. Beaver. "Franny, is this true? I'm surprised you didn't say something about it earlier. Tell us about it."

Franny turned very red, and looked at Judy. Judy was looking very serious, and staring at her, as if to say, "What now?"

Questions

- **What's happening here?**
- Why is Franny so annoyed with Josie?
- Is it okay to criticize other kids' clothing? Is it worse to do it directly or "behind their backs"? Which does more harm?
- Why does Josie brag so much about skiing? Do you think everything she says about it is true?
- Do you think Franny is right to come up with her own story? What about Judy? Should she help Franny keep up the story?
- What should Franny and Judy tell the teacher? What will happen if they keep lying about the trip?

Tale 8

NOT GOOD ENOUGH

Grades 3-5

Issues:
Parental pressure; self-discipline;
respect for the elderly; self-esteem.

Introduction

Jeremy Austin isn't doing well at all in math, a subject in which he supposedly has talent. His mother is so angry about it that open discussion isn't possible. Jeremy is upset, and calms himself rather nicely by doing a favor for the elderly widow next door – he walks her dog. But he walks the dog when he *should* be doing his homework; and he hasn't asked his mother's permission.

When Jeremy gets home, he's feeling better. But his mother is about to discover that he hasn't touched his math homework. At the story's end he is considering what he should say to her.

The conflicting expectations of a parent figure in this story of a boy with good intentions.

Not Good Enough

"That does it!" Jeremy Austin's mother put her coffee cup down and looked across the kitchen table at him; she held his latest math test in her hand. Her eyes were open wide. "I *told* you this would happen! Oh, how many times do I have to say it?"

Jeremy looked down at his shoelaces and kicked at the back of the chair. He knew his mom would be angry, but somehow this was worse than he expected. He'd gotten another C in math.

"Look at me, Jeremy. I'm talking to you!" Reluctantly, he lifted his chin a little so he could see her face. "You and I both know that if you apply yourself, you can do better than this. Am I right?"

"Yeah."

"Yes, *ma'am*. Say 'Yes, *ma'am*.' "

"Boy," Jeremy thought, "she must really be mad if she wants me to say 'Yes, *ma'am*.'"

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"So why don't you do it? Why don't you apply yourself? You and I both know that you are a very talented boy." She gripped the back of the kitchen chair with both hands and looked straight at him. "And this is *math*, Jeremy. It used to be your favorite subject. Is something wrong? I just don't understand." She paused, and sighed. "Look. I've got to run out to the store. You get started on your homework. *Math first*. And when I get back, I'll take a look at it."

He shuffled up the stairs to his room. "Geez, Mom," he was thinking, "a guy's got to relax now and then." He stretched out on his bed with his math homework. He knew he should do it first, but when he looked at the division problems, he felt disgusted. There were 15 of them, all with decimal points. He hated decimals even more than fractions. And he didn't like Mr. Lucas, who had just come to the school this year to teach math. "This is disgusting," Jeremy thought. "I'll *never* get through this."

The doorbell rang twice. That would be old Mrs. Cox from the apartment next door. "Oh, no," he thought, "I bet she wants me to go to the store." He answered the door. Sure enough, it was Mrs. Cox.

"Oh, there you are, Jeremy," she said, smiling. Foster, the dachshund, was with her. "Hello, Mrs. Cox. Hello, Foster."

"I was wondering if I could impose on you to take Foster for his afternoon walk. It's been raining so much—slippery underfoot for an old lady like me—and he needs a good run. Would you mind? He *does* like it when you take him."

"Gosh, Mrs. Cox, of course I wouldn't mind. I mean, uh...." He remembered his math homework. What could he do? He'd never said no to Mrs. Cox. You couldn't say no to somebody as old as Mrs. Cox. "I'll just get my jacket."

Jeremy found his jacket in the closet. Surely this was all right. His mother had always told him to be respectful of the elderly. Then again, she had told him to do his math. But Mrs. Cox was an old lady and needed his help. Foster needed his help. Surely that was more important.

He took Foster's leash from Mrs. Cox and headed out the door. "Long division will have to wait, old buddy," he said fondly as he snapped the leash on Foster's collar.

"What was that dear?" Mrs. Cox asked.

"Oh, nothing. Nothing. See you later!" he called, and he was on his way out.

Outside with Foster, it was great. Jeremy and the dog ran and splashed through the puddles. Once, Foster got the leash wrapped all around a sign post, and Jeremy thought he'd never stop laughing. He forgot all about long division *and* the angry look on his mother's face. Things just *had* to be all right. As he led Foster back into the building, Jeremy felt much better.

But then, as he approached Mrs. Cox's door to take Foster home, he saw his mother talking to Mrs. Cox. They were both shaking their heads. He heard Mrs. Cox say, "He's just a boy," and heard his mother say, "Well, I'm glad he wants to help; I hope he finished his math before he went out...."

Just then Jeremy's mother caught sight of him and said, "Oh, there you are, Jeremy dear. I was just saying to Mrs. Cox that you were working on your math this afternoon. Did you finish it? I'd like to have a look."

Jeremy blushed. Something told him he might be in trouble on this one. What was he going to tell his mom?

Questions

- **What's happening here?**
- Did Jeremy's mother say he had to do his homework right away? Why was she so concerned?
- Was Jeremy right to walk the dog? Why or why not?
- What's more important, helping Mrs. Cox or doing the math homework?

Tale 9

THE BOYS AGAINST THE GIRLS

Grades 4-5

Issues:
Gender identity and loyalty;
sexism; aggression; competition.

Introduction

Competition between the sexes starts early! Grown-ups who are sharing authority in the workplace and at home know that sometimes the old rules of decorum break down; their sons and daughters are already learning the same lesson.

In "The Boys Against the Girls," Joey Simmons is challenged to a fist fight—by a girl. His wrestling with her leaves him with new respect for her strength, but some confusion about the rules of the fight. Should he fight her like a boy, or restrain himself? What if she overpowers him?

His opponent, Heidi, picks the fight, confident that she can win. But can she? And would she do better to compete with Joey in other areas, instead?

This is a provocative story, particularly for co-ed classes, and should be followed by a cooperative supervised activity in which the children accomplish something together: working on a class project, for example, or singing, or playing a non-competitive game.

The Boys Against The Girls

Things were okay between the boys and girls in Mrs. Stevens' fourth-grade class until Heidi came. Heidi Baker. She really knew how to make a guy mad.

Take, for example, the day one of the soccer balls went flat. Usually there were two balls. The boys used one, and the girls used one. But that day Mrs. Stevens said there was only one ball. Joey Simmons reached for it, naturally. He always picked up the soccer ball when the boys went out to play. But Heidi Baker reached right in front of him and took it. "Aw, no, Mrs. Stevens!" Joey complained. "You gotta let the boys have the ball." Mrs. Stevens took the ball back and said, "Since there's only one ball, I think you'd better play together!"

"Oh, yay!" Joey said. "The boys against the girls. We'll massacre 'em!" And the boys began to cheer, "Yeah, we'll massacre 'em!" and "We'll show 'em who's boss!"

"Not so fast!" said Mrs. Stevens. "You're going to be playing on the same teams. Joey, you can be captain of one team; Heidi will be captain of the other. But you've each got to have six girls and six boys on your team."

"Aw, no, Mrs. Stevens," Joey grumbled. "This won't be any fun."

"Play together, or no ball," Mrs. Stevens said firmly.

"Oh, all right." He scowled at Heidi; Heidi scowled back. "But the girls are just going to be in the way; soccer isn't really for girls."

"That's what *you* think, Joey Simmons!" answered Heidi as she headed out the door toward the field.

Once outside, Joey picked the guys he wanted for his team and reluctantly added some girls. He gave a sidelong glance to his best friend Bobby. "Don't kick it to 'em," he whispered. "Don't kick the ball to the girls."

"I heard that!" Heidi said. "So *we* won't kick it to the boys, will we girls? We'll show you guys what girls can do!"

Now the boys on both teams were jeering at the girls. Heidi was getting pretty steamed. She jabbed her finger into Joey's chest and said, "Come on, Simmons. It's over for you. Put 'em up!"

She wanted to fight him. Joey couldn't believe it. His parents had told him never to hit a girl. Ever.

"C'mon, banana face!" she said. "Or are you chicken?"

"Chicken? Of a dumb girl? You gotta be kidding! I'll fight you – and when I win, you gotta tell Mrs. Stevens the boys get the soccer ball."

"Oh, no. When *I* win you tell her the *girls* get the ball."

"Have it your way!" he shrugged. "And may the best *man* win."

And before he knew what was happening, she had grabbed his arm and was twisting it behind his back. They actually started to fight! Heidi had some pretty smooth moves from karate lessons, and she was surprisingly strong. She kept trying to flip him, and Joey could tell that it wouldn't be long before she did. She was some fighter. Joey realized that if he was going to win, he really had to fight her like a guy – not just twist her arm like he did with his little sister at home.

He was just thinking this when she landed a hard punch on his arm and tripped him behind the ankle. He lost his balance and slipped to the ground. Without even thinking, he rolled over, jumped up, and – "*Bam!*" – socked her as hard as he could, right in the stomach.

Heidi turned red all over and clutched her stomach. It looked as if she were really hurt; she couldn't catch her breath. When she did, she gasped. "You *cheat*! You *cheat*! Don't you know you're not supposed to hit a girl in the stomach?" She was crying now. "That's not fair!" she gasped.

Joey saw Mrs. Stevens running towards them. He stretched his arm down to try to help Heidi up, but two of the girls were already helping her to her feet. "Stupid boy," Jennifer Harding was muttering as she helped Heidi along. "This just proves girls are better. They fight fair. They don't *cheat*."

"Yeah," said Sandy Hodges, Heidi's friend. "You're just stupid like the other boys, Joey. You know you're not supposed to hit a boy below the belt! And you don't hit a girl in the stomach. This just proves we're better!"

Questions

- **What's happening here?**
- Was Mrs. Stevens right to insist that the boys and girls play soccer together?
- Why did Heidi want to fight Joey? Was there another way to settle the argument?
- Was it fair of Joey to hit Heidi in the stomach?
- Should there be different rules for boys and girls?

Tale 10
GROWING PAINS

Grades 4-5

Issues:
Loyalty; kindness; coping with physical anomalies; trust.

Introduction

Children are keenly aware of physical differences, especially in terms of development. Obvious physical handicaps or scars can set off cruel behavior among youngsters; so can less obvious features, or even desirable ones. The teasing and divisiveness test the patience of the sufferers and the kindness of their friends.

In "Growing Pains," Emma Sams starts growing at a rate her parents and physician fear is abnormal. Her best friend Marcy stands by her for the best part of the year, but finds by spring that she is weary of all the confidences and worrying. She wants to make a new friend but doesn't want to desert Emma.

Emma's surprising behavior at the story's end puzzles their classroom teacher. What can she do?

Note: The disability described here – gigantism – is actually quite rare in this age group, especially among girls, and was deliberately chosen for that reason, in the hope that the topic would be sufficiently neutral for students to discuss without alarm. Try to keep the early discussion focused on the relationship between the two friends; the students will want to compare this dilemma to situations they have known, but it is best to keep this part of the discussion for later. The more "new" ideas they have as a result of looking at the fictional dilemma, the more opportunities they will see later for dealing creatively with situations they already know.

Growing Pains

It wasn't easy being the tallest in the class. Marcy got sick of it sometimes. When class pictures were taken, she had to stand at the back of the class so she didn't block out the younger girls. When they sang in school assemblies, she was always in the last row. And teachers were always mistaking her for a sixth-grader, when she wasn't even 10 yet. Once, when they were getting ready to leave the assembly hall and go back to their classes, one of the teacher's aides hissed at her to leave with the sixth-graders. "I'm not in sixth grade!" Marcy hissed back. The aide looked puzzled and said, "I'm sorry—you just look like a sixth grader. You're so *tall*!"

How relieved Marcy was to meet Emma Sams! Emma was the new girl who came into her fifth-grade class right after Thanksgiving. She was every bit as tall as Marcy, and Marcy liked her right away. When picture-taking time came, they stood together in the back row. Singing in assembly, lining up to leave, whatever, they were always at the back and having fun.

By Valentine's Day they were such good friends they couldn't imagine what school had been like before they knew each other. By then, too, Emma had actually gotten taller—taller even than Marcy.

Marcy stopped getting taller, but Emma kept growing. She grew and grew, taller and bonier. By May Day she was four inches taller than Marcy, and her parents were getting worried. They took her to a specialist, who did blood tests to find out if Emma had something called "gigantism"—a sickness that makes you terribly big. When strangers passed her on the street now they looked away and whispered, and once Marcy heard a lady say, "That poor girl! How will she ever get along? I've never seen such long arms!" Marcy hadn't noticed before, but the lady was right. It wasn't just that Emma was tall; she also had long arms, arms so long her fingers almost reached her knees.

Emma told Marcy everything—about the blood tests, and how much she hated it when people on the street stared at her, or looked away to keep from staring, and how she worried that her arms would always stay long. Emma worried. And Marcy worried. And Marcy's mother worried.

Marcy's mother started saying things like, "It's going to be harder for Emma to meet boys." And then she started referring to Emma as "Emma Sams" again, as though they'd just

met. "I worry about poor Emma Sams," she'd say to Marcy's father. "I wonder what they're going to do about Emma Sams."

When Marcy heard her mother talk that way, it gave her chills. Maybe they would have to send Emma to a special hospital, or to a special school for people with problems. Marcy had heard about such places, but she didn't think you had to go to them if you were just *tall*—not retarded or anything. Surely Emma wouldn't be retarded just because she was too big for her age. At school the other girls really started to notice Emma's size. Emma made Marcy promise not to tell anyone about the tests she was having, and especially not to say anything about "gigantism," because it was such an awful word.

Just before the end of school, Lily Roberts took Marcy aside and said, "Hey, Marcy, the kids are saying that Emma's really sick. Is it true?"

"No, Lily, it's not true. Emma's just tall, that's all. She's just tall."

"Well," Lily continued, "her arms are so long she looks like an ape. My mom says it isn't natural to be that tall. She says we should all be extra nice to Emma, because she's going to have a hard life and she might be, you know, depressed or something."

Marcy looked at Lily. She had such neat blonde hair. Today it was braided across her head so that she looked like a girl from a picture book. And she had such a pretty name. They'd never really been friends, but Lily was nice. Marcy could hear her mother saying, "I know you're worried about Emma, honey, but you need lots of friends, not just one; you need to play with the other girls, too."

Marcy bit her lip. "Um...." She looked to be sure no one was listening. "Um, you should be nice to her. She had some tests done, but there's really nothing wrong with her."

"Tests? You mean blood tests?"

"Well, yes."

"Tests for what?"

"I can't tell you that. I promised I would never tell!"

"I bet they were for giantism. That's what my mother said Emma might have."

"Not giantism," said Marcy. "Gi*gan*tism. You know, like *gigantic*."

Lily giggled and covered her mouth. "*Oh* my *God*!" she said, which made Marcy giggle. She liked the way Lily said it: "*Oh* my *God*!"

"Gi*gan*tic! That's terrible!" Lily went on. It was funny. When she got excited, her nose turned kind of pink, and she got red in the face, and she looked even more like the doll in the picture book. Marcy giggled some more. "Stop it, Lily, you're making me laugh! It's not funny!" But she couldn't stop giggling, and Lily couldn't stop giggling, and their eyes started watering from all the giggling and they kept saying "*Oh* my *God*!" and giggling some more. Only the bell to go in managed to calm them down.

As soon as they got in, though, Emma asked Marcy what was so funny, and Marcy couldn't tell her. She hadn't meant to break the promise; she hadn't meant to tell Lily about the tests, but Lily pretty much already knew.

The next morning, in the hallway, the girls at their lockers were looking at Emma and whispering. Marcy noticed it the minute she got there, and she felt bad. Maybe Lily had told people about the tests; she should have told Lily not to tell anybody. When Lily came in, though, the girls started getting friendly with Emma, more than they usually would. They all started saying, "Hi, Emma. How's it going?" Then Janie Perkins called out, "Hi, long arms!" and the girls started to giggle.

Emma looked horrified. She grabbed Marcy's arm and squeezed it, hard. "Marcy! You promised you wouldn't tell!"

Suddenly, Marcy felt angry. She brushed Emma's hand away, hard, and said, "For God's sake, Emma! Nobody *has* to tell! They can see it! Everybody can see it! Your arms are too long! I didn't tell! They're just too long. You look like an ape!"

Marcy blushed. She hadn't meant to say that; it just came out. Emma looked like she was going to cry. She stared at Marcy, and then she said, "You're right. You're absolutely right."

Still looking into Marcy's eyes, she scratched under her armpit. She pulled a pencil from her pocket and pretended to peel it like a banana. Then she grunted like a gorilla and started into the classroom, loping along with her knees bent. "Eeee! Oo-oo-oo!! Uh! Uh!"

Marcy looked at Lily; Lily looked at Marcy and shook her head. They both looked at Emma like she'd lost her mind. And then they started to giggle. Lily found a real banana in her lunch bag and gave it to Emma. Emma climbed onto a desk top and started to peel the banana, still acting like an ape.

Just then, Mrs. Burns came in. She looked at Emma on the table with the banana, and Marcy and Lily, and saw the rest of the class pointing and laughing. They all stopped for a minute and looked at her. What would she say? What would she do? Her face looked as if even *she* didn't know. Would she think it was funny?

She didn't. She looked quite stern. She took the banana away from Emma and asked, "Is this yours?"

"No, ma'am, it's Lily's."

"Well, give it back to her, then," she said, and sighed. "Girls, please take your places." Mrs. Burns turned her back to the class and started erasing what was on the board. "Let's get to work."

She seemed angry, but she just went on with the class. Marcy was sort of wishing she would do something: either ask about Emma or say something like, "I can see you've all been having a hard time with this," or "Sometimes we have to break the promises we've made."

But she didn't say any of those things. She just went ahead with school as if nothing had happened. But Marcy thought, and Emma thought this too, that Mrs. Burns was upset, and it wasn't just the noise that was bothering her. It wasn't just that they were rowdy. It was something about Emma pretending to be an ape.

Marcy looked at Emma and wondered if they were still best friends.

Questions

- **What do you think?**
- Why did Emma want to keep it a secret that she was having tests for gigantism?
- Did Marcy break her promise to Emma? Why, or why not?
- Was Lily really trying to help Emma, or was she making fun?
- Why did Emma start running around like an ape?
- What should Mrs. Burns do? Why is she bothered by Emma's pretending?

- Was it fair of Emma to expect Marcy to keep her secret? Can they remain best friends now? Can they remain friends at all?